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Mental Illness in Horror Movies

by Nix Bradly

As I sat in the cafeteria, indifferently pushing my collard greens around with a fork, I noticed a woman in a wheelchair roll past me. She was pulling herself by her feet, slowly touching heel-toe, heel-toe to the ground. Her face was pale and wrinkled, and her eyes were focused miles away from where she sat. The atmosphere felt sterile, but tranquil. That is, until a look of horror distorted her face, as if a terrible realization fell upon her. Her mouth opened to gasp in one final moment of peace before she belted out a shriek of terror. She then jolted herself out of her wheelchair and onto the ground, screaming at an invisible assailant. My heart leapt at the sudden loss of silence, and I was stuck in a fluctuating purgatory between panic and pity. As the hospital staff attended to her, they looked unsurprised as they attempted to calm her and pull her back in her wheelchair. Why are they not surprised? Well, outbursts like this one are the status quo at Lakeview Behavioral Health Facility. I was released from the intensive outpatient program at Lakeview not long after that incident, but I think that shriek will stay with me forever.

As someone who suffers from mental illness, I have no problem saying this potentially taboo statement: Mental illness is scary. It's unpredictable. It's uncomfortable. In some instances, it is downright tragic. So, is it any wonder that mental illness has been used again and again as a plot device in horror movies? If you are at all familiar with the horror genre, you can

probably think of at least a couple examples of "crazy" horror villains. These may even be your favorite type of horror movies. It may also not surprise anyone that these depictions are often considered less than flattering, sometimes portraying the mentally ill as dangerous and evil.

While I do agree with researchers that this genre's history has been far from inclusive, I also propose that we see the genre from another perspective. Instead of believing that mental illness can only ever be exploited and distorted by the horror genre, maybe there is room for compromise. What if instead, we see the horror genre for the potential it has for self-expression? While researchers have long discussed the problematic portrayal of villains with mental illness in horror movies, I believe the future of the genre could be one in which creators explore the inherent horrors of *living* with mental illness. Instead of horror movies perpetuating stigmatization of mental illness, maybe the films can become an avenue of catharsis for those living with mental illness. After all, as scary as it is to see someone experiencing mental illness, it is much more terrifying for the person shrieking on the ground. To give us some perspective, we'll need to venture back to the 1960s.

"It's Alive!" - The Origins of Mental Illness in Horror:

The horror genre has a long history of using mentally ill villains as a method of evoking fear, receiving criticism in doing so. As researcher Erin Heath asserts, "Film characters marked as having a mental disorder often appear as frightening and dangerous," and she specifically notes the movie *Psycho* (1960) in particular (69). *Psycho* is one of the most recognized horror movies of all time, arguably marking the birth of the "Psycho Killer" horror trope. In Alfred

Hitchcock's *Psycho*, the character Norman Bates (right) is a murderous, manipulative man with Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID, formally known as Multiple Personality Disorder) and possibly schizophrenia, who has a "split personality" that is his dead mother. This depiction of DID has been criticized for being dangerously inaccurate. As researcher Danny Wedding says, films like *Psycho* "perpetuate the continuing confusion about the relationship between schizophrenia and dissociative identity disorder" (3). Wedding also criticizes the movies *Friday the 13th* (1980) and *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), both of which feature villains who were treated in psychiatric hospitals, saying that these films make "people who leave psychiatric hospitals . . . " look "violent and dangerous." He goes on to say *Psycho*, *Friday the 13th*, and *Nightmare on Elm Street* all "in part account for the continuing stigma of mental illness" (3).

Another well-known example of a mentally ill horror movie villain is Jack Torrance (left) in Stephen King's *The Shining* (1980). Jack Torrance becomes increasingly delusional while in isolation with his family, until he finally becomes the ax-wielding lunatic that we all recognize. Another horror villain of King's is Annie Wilkes (below) in *Misery* (1990), who displays obsessive-compulsive behaviors as she holds her favorite author captive in her home. These characters are unflattering to say the least, and as Heath asserts, characters with mental

disorders “commonly operate on film as threats against the cinematic common man or woman,” and “embody the frightening uncertainty of the unknown . . . ” (69).

Others argue that these depictions are not as harmful as they are made out to be. One direct challenger to Wedding is Dr. Sharron Packer, who argues that audiences are not mindlessly consuming media and that “… entertainment-oriented mass media is not America’s only exposure to mental illness,” stating that frequently viewed pharmaceutical commercials offer a less exaggerated representation (xvii). Packer also says, “perhaps *Psycho*’s commercial and critical success simply reflected Hitchcock’s mastery of his art and nothing but” (xii). However, even Packer recognizes the tension that exists in our society surrounding the mentally ill, “that they will act out erratically . . . to do us harm” (xxii). I would argue that this tension is still being used as a vehicle of terror in horror movies today, but change appears to be on the horizon.

“They’re Here!” - Current Trends in Horror’s Use of Mental Illness:

The current atmosphere regarding mental illness’ role in horror films is simultaneously more progressive and more of the same. For an example of the latter, M. Night Shyamalan’s *The Visit* (2015) features two elderly villains with dementia and/or schizophrenia. In the film, it is implied their mental conditions led them to do violent, vile things to the two child protagonists. The film, even if unintentionally, implies that the mentally ill (and possibly all

elderly people) are dangerous and unpredictable, following in the footsteps of the history of the genre. M. Night Shyamalan also recently produced *Split* (2016) (left), a movie about a character named Kevin Crumb that exhibits traits of Dissociative Identity Disorder. Kevin has one particularly problematic personality called "The Beast," who is murderous and cannibalistic. Researcher and PhD student Diana Rose Newby criticizes this characterization by saying, "'The Beast' embodies an entrenched belief that to be mentally ill is to be not only violent but less than human . . . " (Newby). She goes on to say, "The host of Hollywood movies that sensationalize and mischaracterize DID . . . have only contributed to the ongoing alienation of people with the disorder."

M. Night Shyamalan is not the only director to be criticized in recent years for being insensitive about mental health. The movie *The Forest* (2016), directed by Jason Zada, has received backlash for minimizing the very real issue of suicide in Japan. The movie takes place primarily in the Aokigahara Forest of Japan, which is a real destination where people end their lives at alarming numbers each year. Instead of being culturally sensitive to this tragic phenomenon, in the words of Lenika Cruz, senior editor for *The Atlantic*, the movie uses a "rotating cast of suicide ghouls [that] pop out from the brush" to get cheap jump scares (Cruz). Cruz goes on to criticize the film for its complete mishandling of the issue of suicide, stating, "It's one thing to exclude any acknowledgment that suicide is a major public-health issue in

Japan (or to include a single line in the film aimed soberly at suicide prevention). It's yet another for the film to shrug off empathy for the people who die in the forest" (Cruz).

I believe that the fear of mental illness is still being used as a plot device in current films because it is easy. As I mentioned earlier, mental illness can be scary and uncomfortable, and consequently, it has become low-hanging fruit for horror directors. However, there has been a noticeable shift in recent years toward horror movies that invoke the fear surrounding mental illness without disparaging those who struggle with them.

One such movie that does this well is *The Babadook* (2014), directed by Jennifer Kent. The movie centers around a mother, Amelia, who is struggling after the tragic death of her husband to raise her emotionally troubled son Samuel (below). The two read a mysterious book about "Mister Babadook", an inescapable monster that slowly starts ruining their lives, consequently releasing him into reality. As the story progresses, Amelia becomes increasingly distressed and aggressive. The idea of not being able to escape the wrath of a disturbing, indestructible entity is scary enough, but that fear is compounded when you consider the fact that the Babadook is a representation of grief and maternal depression. As mental health professional Dr. Pamela Jacobson writes, "The haunting of Amelia by the Babadook is always set within the wider context of her being haunted by the death of her husband . . . " and points out that many of the characteristics that Amelia starts displaying, " . . . low mood, lack of energy, decreased activity and disturbed patterns of eating and sleeping . . . ", are all classic symptoms of depression (Jacobson). The most impactful part of the film for me is that (spoiler

alert) Amelia never truly gets rid of the Babadook, but she manages it and makes peace with it, which is the reality of grief and depression for its sufferers.

I am thankful to say that *The Babadook* is not the only recent film to be taking steps in the right direction. The movie *Hereditary* (2018) also uses a refreshing, yet still horrifying, take on mental illness. Instead of sporting a mentally ill villain, the film's antagonist is largely "the supernatural." Fear of the supernatural provides a vehicle for suspense while still exploring the real concern of inheriting a mental illness. The newest interpretation of *The Invisible Man* (2020) struck me as having an excellent grasp on how to use the scary aspects of trauma without disparaging the traumatized. The movie focuses on a woman, Cecilia, who escapes an abusive relationship. However, after her ex commits suicide, Cecilia believes he is still stalking and terrorizing her, having somehow made himself invisible. I felt that the movie accurately represented many aspects of living with the trauma of abuse. The feeling like the traumatic event is not really over, the fear that no one will believe you, and the inability to trust in your own sense of reality are all very real, very scary facets of living with trauma. I believe *The Invisible Man* did an excellent job of bringing those fears to life, allowing the audience to better empathize with Cecilia's struggles.

I believe the biggest distinction between whether a horror movie is contributing to the stigma of mental illness or contributing to the end of it is where the villainy lies. In movies such as *Psycho*, *Misery*, and *Split,* the villainy comes from *the person* who has mental illness, whereas in *The Babadook, Hereditary,* and *The Invisible Man,* the villainy lies *within the illness itself*. In my opinion, an easy way to distinguish between the two is to ask yourself, "Is this movie making me empathize with those affected by mental illness? Or is it making me fearful of 'crazy' people?" If the answer is affirmative to the latter, then it might be part of the problem. Luckily, as a consumer of horror movies, you can help change that.

"Be Afraid, Be Very Afraid" - Rationale for Artifact Contribution:

Before we discuss how we as consumers can bring about positive change, I ask you to now take a moment and review this short video: https://youtu.be/ZIE7qYKSJnc

I made this video because I wanted to emphasize the difference between how mentally ill people are characterized in many horror movies and how mentally ill people actually are. The wonderfully brave people that offer the testimonies I use in this video are the reason why addressing stigmatization in film is important. I wanted to show that mental health stigma is not just an abstract, unsavory idea, but a real challenge that we must deal with every day. For example, the shame surrounding her intrusive thoughts kept Rose Bretécher from seeking treatment for twelve years. Cecilia McGough was shamed by her own family into not seeking out medication for her schizophrenia. Tragically, Jame Geathers will forever wonder if facing her own inner demons could have helped save the life of one of her friends.

However, I do not want the takeaway of this video to be, "Horror movies are bad, and you should feel bad for liking them!" I will always love the horror genre, and I believe it has so much untapped potential. As Rose Bretécher says towards the end of the video, "I think we need to use media and technology and storytelling to make the wrong time [to be born with a mental illness] the right time" (00:12:42-50). I believe the horror genre could use storytelling to help make right now the right time. Furthermore, I believe these stories are best told by the ones who experience mental illness firsthand.

"In Space, No One Can Hear You Scream" - The Future of Mental Illness in the Horror Genre:

By now, I hope it is apparent that the stigma around mental health is a serious issue, and it is one that can be perpetuated by the inaccurate, harmful misuse of mental illness in many horror movies. The genre has been criticized for decades and will continue to be scrutinized by the community if the trend of mentally ill villains does not change. Even more serious a consequence is that, if this trend does continue indefinitely, it will continue to alienate people with mental illness by spreading misinformation and fear. I hope we can all agree, things need to change.

There are thankfully many steps you can take to change this trend. The easiest step is critically thinking about the message behind the horror movies you are watching. This doesn't mean you can't enjoy horror movies anymore; simply take a second to consider if the message is one that inspires empathy for or fear of those affected by mental illness. This will curb the negative influence these movies may have on your perception of the mentally ill. The next step

would be to support movies that do inspire empathy. We should praise and encourage films that give accurate representations of mental health, the goal being to inspire more creators to follow suit. The ultimate goal would be to uplift and support those who have mental illness to express themselves through the art of making horror films. The act of creating art is therapeutic and cathartic within itself, and I believe the best people to explore the struggle of anything are the people who are directly affected by said struggle. By encouraging mentally ill directors, creators, and artists, we could increase the empathy towards the mentally ill and help stop the stigma surrounding mental health, while in turn giving artists an outlet. With twenty percent of Americans living with mental illness (www.nami.org), we are all affected in some way by mental illness, but we can all help end the stigma.

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